

# The Influence of Humanism on the Main Magisterial Reformers

John F. Lingelbach,  
Grace Christian University

*Abstract: In light of the wide acknowledgement that humanism influenced the Protestant Reformation, one must ask the question about how much of what Protestantism maintains owes a debt to this modern ideology often juxtaposed in contrast to Christianity. Given the remarkable role of such a controversial ideology during a seminal period of the modern church, this study seeks an answer to the following question: how did the humanism movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries impact the lives and work of the main Magisterial Reformers? This research is important and necessary because discovering the answer to this question leads to an understanding of the larger question of how humanism impacts the Protestant tradition. Understanding the nature of this impact sheds light on what Protestantism means and may induce some Christians to contemplate why they call or do not call themselves “Protestants” or “humanists.” This present study progressed through four phases. First, the study sought to describe the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Second, it sought to describe the impact this humanism had on society. Third, the study analyzed how the social impacts of the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries served to advance or hinder the causes of the main Magisterial Reformers. Finally, it synthesized the findings. This paper argues and concludes that the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries impacted the lives and work of the main Magisterial Reformers by facilitating their desire to include the common people in a religious world previously dominated by the elite.*

**Keywords:** Calvin, Humanism, Luther, Protestant, Reformation, Zwingli

## Introduction

The late R.C. Sproul blamed humanism imported from Germany for the results of a recent survey on American orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> He specifically attributed Americans' views on Scripture and God to the proliferation of humanism among mainline churches. The survey, a research study

<sup>1</sup> R. C. Sproul, “Everyone’s a Theologian Part 1” (lecture, Ligonier Ministries, Sanford, FL, April 3, 2014).

commissioned by Ligonier Ministries, found that less than half of Americans agree with what Ligonier considers orthodox scriptural doctrine and many lack a proper view of God.<sup>2</sup> These findings, coupled with Sproul's remarks, provide ample reason for Thomas Howard and J. I. Packer to observe that some believe "humanism ... and Christianity are antithetical."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Sproul's own assertion that everyone can be a theologian has its drawbacks when those who attempt it turn out to be heretics.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the very humanism imported from Germany that Sproul castigates may be an offshoot of the humanism that served to furnish the foundation of a key Protestant tenet: namely, that one need not be an academic or of the privileged class to determine one's theological principles. While Howard and Packer insist that the humanism of today is different from the humanism that came out of the Renaissance and impacted the Reformation, they concede that Renaissance efforts to distance art and science from Christianity eventually became the humanism of today.<sup>5</sup> Though Carter Lindberg characterizes Zwingli's humanism as being of the biblical sort, little doubt exists that the ideology of humanism in its more generic form served as a dominant influencing factor among the main Magisterial Reformers.<sup>6</sup> Bernd Moeller summarizes the extent of this influence by concluding, "no humanism, no Reformation."<sup>7</sup>

In light of the wide acknowledgement that humanism influenced the Protestant Reformation, one must ask the question about how much of what Protestantism maintains owes a debt to this modern ideology often juxtaposed in contrast to Christianity. Given the remarkable role of such a controversial ideology during a seminal period of the modern church, this study seeks an

---

<sup>2</sup> Ligonier Ministries, "The State of Theology: Theological Awareness Benchmark Study, Research Report, Tuesday, October 28, 2014," accessed September 16, 2020, <https://ligonier-static-media.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/thestateoftheology/TheStateOfTheology-Whitepaper.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Howard and J. I. Packer, *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 1999), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Sproul, "Everyone's a Theologian Part 1."

<sup>5</sup> Howard and Packer, *Christianity*, 16, 24.

Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 551, 1634, 1637, 4112, Amazon Kindle.

Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978), 1650, Amazon Kindle.

Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 151.

<sup>7</sup> Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1982), 36; quoted in Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 1637.

answer to the following question: how did the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries impact the lives and work of the main Magisterial Reformers? This research is important and necessary because discovering the answer to this question leads to an understanding of the larger question of how humanism impacts the Protestant tradition. Understanding the nature of this impact sheds light on what Protestantism means and may induce some Christians to contemplate why they call or do not call themselves “Protestants” or “humanists.” This paper argues and concludes that the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries impacted the lives and work of the main Magisterial Reformers by facilitating their desire to include the common people in a religious world previously dominated by the elite.

This deductive literary study involving conceptual argumentation drew upon dialogical, analytical, and synthetic methodologies in discovering an answer. It engaged in dialogue with scholars, as well as analyzed and synthesized conclusions reached among students of humanism and the Magisterial Reformation. The study progressed through four phases. First, the study sought to describe the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Second, it sought to describe the impact this humanism had on society. Third, the study analyzed how the social impacts of the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries served to advance or hinder the causes of the main Magisterial Reformers. Finally, it synthesized the findings. This paper serves as a report of those findings.

### **Fourteenth and Fifteenth-Century Humanism**

Renaissance humanists took a special interest in pre-Christian ideas.<sup>8</sup> However, this interest did not necessarily entail the wholesale rejection of Christianity or notions of God as some maintain, but rather the inclusion of philosophy along with theology as an object of valuable study.<sup>9</sup> This preference for classical philosophy stems from the humanists’ perspective of history. Humanists in the Middle Ages held that the secular classics had valuable life lessons, and they supplemented training in Medieval Latin with

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter Cave, *Humanism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 30.

<sup>9</sup> Will Durant, *The Renaissance: A History of Civilization in Italy from 1304–1576 A.D.*, vol. 5 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), 139, Scribd Ebook.

curricula that took advantage of the ancients' literary contributions.<sup>10</sup> In their view, the "Middle Ages" functioned as an undesirable period intellectually, due to its exclusive dependence on supernaturalism and over-zealous religious authoritarianism.<sup>11</sup> The Middle Ages stood between the perfect age of classicism and modernism.<sup>12</sup> Humanists like Erasmus considered those who did not study classic literature to be barbarians.<sup>13</sup>

This movement to complement theological understandings with secular ones serves to highlight several issues in medieval thinking. The humanists' desire to gather secular knowledge in addition to the theology of the day betrays two assumptions. First, it assumes a difference between the secular and the religious. By insisting on including classical study along with theology, the humanists were really stating that a bifurcation of universal truth exists, on one hand, truth which is divine, and on the other hand, everything else. This bifurcation leads directly to the second assumption, a subconscious Platonism which separates the importance of the spiritual and the material. The classics emphasize the material while medieval religious literature emphasizes the spiritual. Though perhaps the humanists did not seek to break down the subconscious wall between the two, in their emphasis on the preeminence of mankind, the breakdown occurred. Consequently, in time, the physical needs of humanity would take on a pronounced spiritual import. After all, did not the notion of *imago Dei* call for a deeper inquiry into what man could contribute to his own understanding of the universe?

For this reason, Renaissance humanists emphasized mankind's uniqueness in the universe.<sup>14</sup> For example, while their predecessors merely saw man as fallen, humanists included the doctrine that man is made in the image of God, which in turn led to an appreciation of the dignity of man.<sup>15</sup> As a result, unlike angels and animals, humans can choose the direction of their lives.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the modern notion of self-determination shows its roots. No longer should people allow the church to dictate the decisions they make. Because each person is created in God's image, each person carries God's authority. This authority does not manifest itself to a greater degree within the

---

<sup>10</sup> G. R. Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation: Tradition, Emergence and Rupture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 250.

<sup>11</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 251; Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 534.

<sup>12</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 534–44.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 251.

<sup>14</sup> Cave, *Humanism*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Pico Della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

clergy, but each person has a dignity that comes directly from God, not by way of ecclesiastical dispensation. The implications of this fresh understanding sent intellectual ripples that became tidal waves during the Reformation, in particular with regard to the question of who had the prerogative to interpret Scripture. Out of the humanists' thirst for knowledge from classical literature and its moral implications, new beliefs about biblical hermeneutics grew as the logical next step.

Renaissance humanists believed that mankind's preeminence manifests itself most decidedly in ancient Greek and Roman art and literature.<sup>17</sup> The interest in ancient literature, in particular, led to a new approach to intellectualism. Universities began offering courses of study based on humanism favoring original sources over the works of contemporary writers.<sup>18</sup> The study of ancient Greek texts for their intrinsic value replaced their mere use as practice for learning Latin.<sup>19</sup> The implementation of humanism in education led Erasmus to write *How to Study*, wherein he asserts that students must be able to communicate well and not simply learn facts.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Erasmus maintained that students should learn how to interpret the works of others.<sup>21</sup> Allowing students to interpret classical secular literature would later have ramifications for the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>22</sup> No longer would biblical hermeneutics find a home exclusively among those with ecclesiastical authority.

With the advent of student empowerment came the need for greater access to literary material. Humanistic methodology encouraged the individualistic interpretation of literature. In the past, students had limited exposure to writings during the course of study. Now they wanted personal copies, and the invention of the printing press meant that this was possible.<sup>23</sup> In addition, with the printing press, scholars could quickly publish pamphlets broadly disseminating their own ideas.<sup>24</sup> The dependence on scribes and their tedious production waned. In addition to this demand for personal access to literary material, the change in intellectual methods from scholasticism to humanism also meant that students should study the backgrounds of their

---

<sup>17</sup> Durant, *The Renaissance*, 139.

<sup>18</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 248–49.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 251–52.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>23</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 257.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

subjects.<sup>25</sup> This need called for the expansion of libraries. Libraries afforded scholars virtually unlimited access to many different ideas and furnished them with the potential of maximum knowledge. Rather than adhere to the teachings of one authority on a subject, students could now supplement theories with additional support as well as with opposing positions. This in turn would lead them to begin reinterpreting the world on their own.

In summary, the Renaissance was not a departure from theology to philosophy, but rather a new inclusion of ancient philosophy in the intellectual world alongside theological teaching. This return to ancient literary material led to the belief that man had something to contribute to his world. The glory of man and his achievements as manifest in the classics bespoke of a power that the biblical tradition affirmed: man in *imago Dei*. Though over time this rediscovery of man's standing in the universe would lead to an arguably unhealthy anthropocentrism, in the Late Middle Ages this acknowledgement of man's position, as God designated, to dominate the earth furnished a hygienic change to the status quo. This change in perspective would have implications for European society within a relatively short period of time.

### **Humanism's Social Impact on the Late Middle Ages**

The humanism of the previous two hundred years commandeered the intellectual world of Western Europe in the sixteenth century and led to remarkable social permutations.<sup>26</sup> Most of these societal changes came as a corollary to humanism's emphasis on the place of mankind in the world.<sup>27</sup> Whereas medieval art had almost exclusively found its basis in religious themes, the sixteenth century witnessed the proliferation of sensual art highlighting the virtues of human freedom and power.<sup>28</sup> Humanist scholars began taking positions of leadership in society and politics.<sup>29</sup> This leadership role also manifested itself in the church, for example Alonzo Fernández de Madrigal served as a humanist academic and bishop.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, while some humanists remained loyal to the Christian faith, others detached themselves from Judaistic-based Christianity in favor of Greek philosophy

---

<sup>25</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 258.

<sup>26</sup> Durant, *The Renaissance*, 151.

<sup>27</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 232.

<sup>28</sup> Durant, *The Renaissance*, 153.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>30</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 233.

which they considered more venerable.<sup>31</sup> This in turn led to a rejection of the doctrine of *nulla salus extra ecclesiam*, that salvation can only be found in the church.<sup>32</sup> The humanists traded the authority of Christianity for pagan philosophy in order to accommodate the burgeoning rediscovery of human freedom.<sup>33</sup> The Catholic Church with its ethics and moral dictums had to give way to the superiority of man's intellect. Lindberg succinctly captures this idea when he writes,

By about 1500, the symbiosis of increasingly widespread literacy and printing along with Renaissance intellectual impulses stimulated an unprecedented development of individuality and the formation of individual consciousness. This, along with the ability of individuals and small groups to attain great wealth and political power by their own initiative, gave rise to new values and political factions and challenged the old ones.<sup>34</sup>

For centuries, the medieval social structure had depended on the authority of the church. Twentieth-century students of the Middle Ages can find it difficult to grasp the extent to which society inextricably linked itself to ecclesiastical power and support. However, in order to appreciate the changes humanism brought to society (changes which contemporary society arguably takes for granted), one must be conscious of how entwined social life and ecclesiastical life had become. The coming separation of the two would prove painful. The church legitimized society and controlled almost all of its property and wealth.<sup>35</sup> The self-determination that came about as the fruit of the humanism of the Renaissance and looked upon such absolute authority in a questionable way proved nothing short of revolutionary.

Ironically, a remarkable amount of this type of questioning came from within the church itself and at the highest level.<sup>36</sup> Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455), appointed humanist Lorenzo Valla as apostolic secretary. Valla had exposed the *Donation of Constantine* to be a forgery and denounced the Latin Jerome had employed in his Vulgate Bible. In this appointment of Valla and through other actions, Nicholas hoped to place the church in the lead with

---

<sup>31</sup> Durant, *The Renaissance*, 149.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>34</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformation*, 1244–52.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 686–95.

<sup>36</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 1636.

regard to Renaissance ideals; no one could accuse the pope of standing in the way of intellectual progress in general or of humanism in particular.<sup>37</sup> With the refutation of so significant a document as the *Donation*, Valla had ploughed a field fertile for skepticism. Valla, an individual, had gone up against the monolithic Catholic authority and succeeded. This type of individualistic accomplishment based on humanistic intellectual principles created an environment where traditional authority could receive scrutiny and be challenged. The individual was on its way to gaining an equal standing with societal groups, the church being one of these and an important one at that.

Though some locate the beginning of individualism in the twelfth century, little argument exists that the Renaissance and its humanism played a remarkable role in solidifying the individual's standing within society at large.<sup>38</sup> While individualism from 1100 to the beginning of the Renaissance manifested itself through the replacement of feudalism with mercantilism, the roots of this came from Scripture.<sup>39</sup> The rediscovery of ancient literature, including a newfound zeal for learning the biblical languages, revealed truths that inspired the questioning of traditional authority.<sup>40</sup> The proliferation of intellectualism among the masses, coupled with the transition from a feudal property-based economy to a monetary system, meant more of the common people could question and subsequently denounce time-honored beliefs if they so choose. The staying power of the individualism wrought and solidified by Renaissance humanism demonstrated itself through the papacy's difficulty in maintaining a stronghold on its constituency. The challenge of conciliarism in the church along with various monarchs' recalcitrance against papal jurisdiction eventually fueled the breakup of the *corpus Christianum*.<sup>41</sup> No longer would every man depend solely on the church for his salvation. No longer would he look to the church to understand the world. Of greater significance, no longer would he rely on others to teach him about God.

In conclusion, the individualism that flourished as an offshoot of Renaissance humanistic thinking would eventually, and logically, mature into

---

<sup>37</sup> M. Deanesly, *A History of the Medieval Church 590–1500*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1928), 331–32.

<sup>38</sup> Antony Black, “The Individual and Society,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c.350–c.1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 588–89.

<sup>39</sup> Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050–1200* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>41</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 1475.

the wholesale rejection of absolute generalizations. No longer did one rule apply for all. Separate and even contradictory ideas could find acceptance among the tolerant. Self-government meant just that; no one could, or should, coerce an individual to comply, whether that individual consisted of an individual state, church, family, or person. The individual had become “a subjective creation,” with each person capable of “creating himself. General rules were no longer immutable entities.”<sup>42</sup> Eventually, the Catholic Church and its new Protestant companion fractured, each denomination and layman recreating itself through its recreation of religious understanding. Religious authority was subject to the whim or discipline, as the case may be, based on the desires or convictions of disparate individuals. Both the good and bad consequences of the Reformation would bear this out. Either way, “confidence that the Book, the Bible, set the rules for its own interpretation was going to be shaken … by new attitudes to the book bred by Renaissance studies.”<sup>43</sup> This study now turns to understanding the direct impact humanism had on the main Magisterial Reformers.

### **Analysis: Humanism and the Cause of the Reformers**

As seen above, Renaissance humanism gained acceptance among the secular as well as the religious. It had something for everyone. For the secular it had the glorification of man; for the religious it emphasized the *imago Dei*. Though at times considered synonymous with secularism, the humanism of the Renaissance fueled the fires of the Reformers. The main Magisterial Reformers—Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin—would borrow from its till in their struggle against both the Catholic Church as well as against the Radical Reformers. However, they did not merely employ it to advance their cause. For them, it proved to be both foundational and catalytic. As Lindberg observes, “the ground for the Reformers’ critique of the recent past as degenerate was prepared by the prior generation of humanists.”<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Torben Hviid Nielsen, “The State, the Market and the Individual. Politics, Economy and the Idea of Man in the Works of Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith and in Renaissance Humanism,” *Acta Sociologica* 29, no. 4 (November): 283–302, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000169938602900401>.

<sup>43</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 166.

<sup>44</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 532–42.

### Martin Luther

Renaissance humanism had both indirect and direct benefits for Luther's cause, and he exploited these benefits at will. In an indirect way of impact, Pope Julius II's interest in the arts (presumably a consequence of a generally Renaissance-influenced papacy) led to the building of St. Peter's basilica, which drove his need to collect funds through the sale of indulgences.<sup>45</sup> The avarice manifest in the advertisement and transaction of indulgences furnished Luther with an overt example of the vice with which he maintained the papacy was plagued. It fed directly into all he was asserting and thereby enabled him to win support among the common people. Indeed, the very idea that bourgeois families like Luther's could send their sons to college and enable them to advance in education as Luther had owed a debt to humanism's infatuation with intellectualism as manifest through the proliferation of universities.<sup>46</sup> In addition to furnishing a fertile environment for Luther's agenda to bud, humanism also offered a vehicle for the dissemination of his ideas via the printing press. Though, Luther studied under scholasticism, and his desire for a healthy debate led to his writing the ninety-five theses, his theses gained from the humanism of the Renaissance.<sup>47</sup> The printing press contributed to their dissemination among all classes of people in Germany and beyond, having been translated and edited for the vernacular.<sup>48</sup>

Arguably, Luther also wittingly took advantage of humanistic notions, some of which may have been so inculcated into his thinking they became second nature to him. For example, in his answer to Johann van der Ecken at the Diet of Worms, Luther's stated reliance on Scripture over a reliance on popes or councils smacks of humanism's desire to get back to original sources and its individualistic right to challenge traditional authorities. Also, Luther's criticism of church dogma regarding the mystery behind the Mass and the papal requirement for confession epitomizes humanism's individualistic recreation.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Luther's doctrine of justification by faith owes its rediscovery to Luther's examination of the Greek text. He was unable to grasp the apostle Paul's meaning from the Latin. Roland H. Bainton, Luther's

---

<sup>45</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformation*, 1537.

<sup>46</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 263, 264.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 264–65.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>49</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 270.

biographer, understands that Luther “could never join those who discarded the Humanist tools of scholarship.”<sup>50</sup>

Finally, Luther’s handling of the Scripture gives testimony to humanism’s influence on the man. He translated the New Testament into German so all of his people had access to God’s word.<sup>51</sup> Had humanism not taken such a hold in his thinking, he may never have considered the notion of placing the Scriptures into the hands of his fellow man. Indeed, it was in this translation that Luther “conjoined both Renaissance and Reformation strands of the changes which were taking place.”<sup>52</sup> He used Erasmus’ Greek text rather than the Vulgate for the work. Once the work on the Scriptures was complete, someone would need to help people understand their meaning. Furthermore, unlike his predecessors, Luther, like the humanists, sought to teach children as witnessed by his development of catechisms for the young.<sup>53</sup>

Evans understands the Reformers’ value of individual interpretation of Scripture when she observes that they wanted to prevent the church from being perceived as “the Bible’s only official interpreter.”<sup>54</sup> Though Luther typified this desire, the notion of private interpretation could backfire as he discovered in his relationship with fellow Reformer Andreas Karlstadt. Whereas Luther saw in Scripture an emphasis on justification, Karlstadt saw one on regeneration. Humanism having reached its logical conclusion, the laity’s independence from the Catholic Church meant an equally independent spirit from Lutheranism. Luther felt the “shock of having his own followers read very differently the biblical text he had labored to make available to them” in his German translation.<sup>55</sup> However, because of his methodologies, the humanists would come to refer to Luther as one of their own.<sup>56</sup>

### Ulrich Zwingli

Luther’s Reformation spread. In Zurich, it gained a foothold through the work of Zwingli, and would find fuel in Zwingli’s humanism. Zwingli had studied humanism during his undergraduate years in Basel<sup>57</sup> and had let it

---

<sup>50</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 820.

<sup>51</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 273.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 4678–4709.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>55</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 4640.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 1639.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 3981.

become so much of an influential factor in his life that Lindberg maintains that it served as the driving force behind the Reformation in Zurich.<sup>58</sup> As a fruit of these leanings, Zwingli knew Hebrew and Greek and could read the Old Testament in Hebrew.<sup>59</sup> His exposure to the ideology led to his growing interest in the primary literary sources of Christian thought<sup>60</sup> and humanist linguistic tools led to Zwingli's doctrine of the Eucharist, which countered both the Catholic as well as the Lutheran understanding of Christ's body.<sup>61</sup> His humanism thrived on his personal relationship with Erasmus. Zwingli purchased all of his works, and venerated him.<sup>62</sup>

Zwingli's humanistic thirst for primary sources led logically to the undergirding principle of his ministry which asserted that all things must be considered in the light of biblical authority.<sup>63</sup> As a result, Zwingli realized that common people not only needed access to the Scriptures but also that no one had the right to deny them this access. Because his followers were hungry to know the Bible, Zwingli would combine sermonizing with lecturing and in their own language.<sup>64</sup> In this way he was able to bring the common man into a religious world typically only accessible to the learned. This aptitude for hermeneutics notwithstanding, Zwingli remained careful to emphasize the priority of the Word itself over even seemingly correct interpretations. Christians must be "taught of God, not of men."<sup>65</sup> In addition to his intellectual theological pursuits, both Zwingli's Christianity and his humanism spurred him to stand against the friars who hoarded money and accumulated real estate by insisting that their goods be used to support the poor in general and the creation of hospitals in particular.<sup>66</sup>

Obscurantism both obstructed and accompanied Zwingli's ministry. As an example of the type of obscurantism Zwingli opposed, when called before the city council to give an account of his activities, Zwingli had expected a public theological discussion, but the ecclesiastical authorities

---

<sup>58</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 4116.

<sup>59</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 307.

<sup>60</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 3987.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 4385.

<sup>62</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 307; William M Blackburn, *Ulrich Zwingli, the Patriotic Reformer: A History* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1868), 44.

<sup>63</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 4076.

<sup>64</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 307.

<sup>65</sup> Ulrich Zwingli, *Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*; quoted in Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 154.

<sup>66</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 308.

demurred because they believed such discussions should not be had before the laity.<sup>67</sup> In addition, just like Luther had problems with his disciples interpreting Scripture differently than he did, Zwingli experienced a similar frustration with the Anabaptists.<sup>68</sup> So intense was Zwingli's desire to empower the common man in the things of God, those who reached different conclusions through interpretation than did he "insisted that they were only carrying Zwingli's own commitment to the Bible as the norm for faith and life to its logical conclusions."<sup>69</sup>

### John Calvin

Having come a generation after Luther, Calvin's education took on an even stronger Renaissance flavor than that of Wittenberg's doctor.<sup>70</sup> Educated in an atmosphere of French humanism, Calvin became a student of no fewer than four humanists, the most influential on him being Erasmus.<sup>71</sup> Calvin's first work was a commentary on Seneca.<sup>72</sup> Calvin's humanism inspired him to study the church fathers, Latin, Hebrew, Greek, and furnished him with a desire to understand the church from the perspective of its biblical roots.<sup>73</sup> However, debate exists regarding the degree to which Calvin embraced humanism. While some maintain they can see humanistic content in his work, others claim he only employed humanism's methodology.<sup>74</sup> Either way, he did not fully embrace Erasmus in his theology,<sup>75</sup> but Jean Sturm's humanist school played a remarkable role in Calvin's educational efforts in Geneva.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, though Calvin's humanism did not have quite the overt effect on commoners as Luther's or Zwingli's did, one can see an impact. For example, in Geneva, Calvin began including the congregation in singing in church rather than limiting it to a carefully selected and talented choir.<sup>77</sup> In addition,

---

<sup>67</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 4640.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 315.

<sup>71</sup> Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 203. The other three humanists were Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples, Matharin Cordier, and Guillaume Budé.

<sup>72</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 5622.

<sup>73</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, sc5633; Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 203.

<sup>74</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 5633.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 5639.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 5852.

<sup>77</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 317.

and perhaps more significantly, Calvin allowed for lay input into the process for the selection of clergy.<sup>78</sup>

### **Synthesis: Late Medieval Religion and the Common Man**

To summarize, the main Magisterial Reformers' humanism contributed to the inclusion of the common laity in three key areas of religion. First, it empowered commoners to read and understand the Scriptures on their own. The Reformers refused to accept a paradigm that only gave clergy access to the Bible. This refusal drove them to translate the Scriptures into the languages that people spoke in their everyday lives rather than keep the Bible at a cryptic distance through the exclusive use of Latin. The Reformers also encouraged sermonizing and lecturing in the language of their listeners. The printing press expedited the dissemination of not only the Bible but also the Reformers' tracts, sermons, and lectures. The humanistic thirst for education for the bourgeois coupled with the prolific spread of religious literature meant that the laity would begin interpreting the Scriptures and making application by and for itself, though this did not always sit well with the likes of Luther, Zwingli, or Calvin.

Second, the main Magisterial Reformers' humanism naturally resulted in a new inclusion of the laity in church life. From Luther's initial awakening, the Reformers continuously and consistently spoke out against the grievous double standard they witnessed in the conduct of the clergy. Renaissance humanism had midwifed a rebirth of the *imago Dei* in man. No one could claim a corner-of-the-market on such a precious attribute. If the clergy preached a particular lifestyle, it should exemplify it. As a practical outworking of this idea, the Reformers began including the laity in more and more of ecclesiastical life, from the inclusion of the congregation in singing during services to decision-making in the selection of clergy.

Finally, the main Magisterial Reformers' humanism cleared the way for them to steer commoners in a theological direction that fell more in line with their view of biblical doctrine than with that of the papacy. They pointed to a greater reliance on Scripture over one on popes. Their desire to return to original sources justified the individual's right to challenge traditional authorities even those authorities held by the "vicar" of Christ. Among the theological changes in the Reformation, such as those to the procedure of

---

<sup>78</sup> Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 319.

confession and the doctrine of the Eucharist, arguably of greatest import stands Luther's doctrine of justification by faith which owes its rediscovery to his examination of the Greek text. This rediscovery owes a debt to humanism's interest in returning *ad fontes* and led to the rejection of the notion of *nulla salus extra ecclesiam*; the commoner would no longer need to depend on another man for salvation. He could go directly to Christ.

### Conclusion

Renaissance humanism furnished both the environment and the means for the main Magisterial Reformers to bring historically unreachable doctrinal understanding to the otherwise theologically uninitiated. It did this through a natural transition from scholarly interest and appreciation of the human being to physical access to both the Scriptures and their faithful interpretation. Seeing this development furnishes an understanding of the degree to which humanism impacts Protestantism at its roots. As a result, some may find reason to reevaluate the suitability of considering themselves either "Protestant," "humanist," or both. Seeing humanism in the Reformation also brings another significant issue to light. Though within each of the main Magisterial Reformers' work humanism manifested itself differently, one theme appears common to all three men: God should be accessible to everyone. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin took the lofty things of God and made them accessible to the common man. This condescension took place first in their interest in getting back to the original sources. Their education in ancient languages spurred on by humanistic interests served as a natural lead-in to an interest in returning *ad fontes* of Scripture particularly in overturning a dependence on the Latin Vulgate. The freshness of uncovering long-forgotten linguistic features coupled with the newfound humanistic appreciation for the image of God in man called for a Bible in the vernacular. Bibles in German and French rather than Latin began to abound at the hands of scholars. This in turn led to the questioning of doctrinal "sacred cows" of the Catholic Church. No longer would papal or conciliar authority have supremacy over the Scriptures. Even though the idea mildly chagrined the Reformers, the task of interpretation fell to the laity. At long last, each person could possess a copy of the Scriptures made on a press and in his own language He could finally make an attempt to understand it on his own.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bainton, Roland H. *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978.
- Black, Antony. "The Individual and Society." In *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c.350–c.1450*. Edited by J. H. Burns. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Blackburn, William M. *Ulrich Zwingli, the Patriotic Reformer: A History*. Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1868.
- Cave, Peter. *Humanism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2009.
- Deanesly, M. *A History of the Medieval Church 590–1500*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Methuen, 1928.
- Durant, Will. *The Renaissance: A History of Civilization in Italy from 1304–1576 A.D.* Vol. 5 of *The Story of Civilization*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1952.
- Evans, G. R. *The Roots of the Reformation: Tradition, Emergence and Rupture*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.
- Howard, Thomas and J. I. Packer. *Christianity: The True Humanism*. 1985. Reprint, Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 1999.
- Janz, Denis R. ed. *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*. Minneapolis, MN, Augsburg Fortress, 1999.
- Ligonier Ministries. "The State of Theology: Theological Awareness Benchmark Study, Research Report, Tuesday, October 28, 2014." <https://ligonier-static-media.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/thestateoftheology/TheStateOfTheology-Whitepaper.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2020).
- Lindberg, Carter. *The European Reformations*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Moeller, Bernd. *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*. Edited and translated by H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1982. Quoted in Lindberg, Carter. *The European Reformations*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Morris, Colin. *The Discovery of the Individual 1050–1200*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1972.
- Nielsen, Torben Hviid. "The State, the Market, and the Individual: Politics, Economy and the Idea of Man in the works of Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith and in Renaissance Humanism." *Acta Sociologica* 29, no. 4 (December 1986): 283–302. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000169938602900401>.
- Sproul, R. C. "Everyone's a Theologian Part 1." Lecture, Ligonier Ministries, Sanford, FL, April 3, 2014.
- Zwingli Ulrich. *Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*. Quoted in Janz, Denis R. ed. *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*. Minneapolis, MN, Augsburg Fortress, 1999.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

***John F. Lingelbach*** holds a Ph.D. in Theology and Apologetics (Church History) from Liberty University. He is an adjunct professor at Grace Christian University where he teaches Old and New Testament Studies. His publications include “The Date of the Muratorian Fragment: An Inference to the Best Explanation” (dissertation), and “First Century Christian Diversity: Historical Evidence of a Social Phenomenon,” also published in SHERM.